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EIU Prof's 'Portion Size Me' Says Bring on the Fast Food -- In Moderation

Oct-17-2005

Fast-food restaurants got a black eye from the Oscar-winning "Super Size Me" documentary, but James Painter thinks the industry deserves a break today.

After all, the Eastern Illinois University professor points out, even cheeseburgers and fries can occasionally be included in a healthy diet. Healthy choices can be found at every fast-food restaurant.

"Portion size is the key to the American obesity epidemic," said Painter, chair of EIU's School of Family and Consumer Sciences.

To prove his point, Painter created his own documentary, "Portion Size Me," which follows two EIU students who eat nothing but fast food for a month – and lose weight in the process.

"My goal is to change the face of the fast-food industry, not shut it down," Painter said. "Hopefully, it will change what people are choosing to eat, which would therefore change the menu offerings."



James Painter, chair of Eastern Illinois University's School of Family and Consumer Sciences, sits with a table full of fast food during filming of the documentary 'Portion Size Me' at Morton Park in Charleston, Ill. The film, a take-off on the Oscar-winning documentary 'Super Size Me,' maintains that even fast food can be OK, as long as people eat correct portions.

Filmed over the summer at 10 restaurants in Coles County, the documentary follows two dietetics graduate students – 254-pound Aaron Grobengieser and 108-pound Ellen Shike – who ate portions suitable for their body types, with all of the food coming from fast-food restaurants and gas stations.

Painter told the students to maintain their usual body weight, but both of them ended up losing weight and even lowering their cholesterol.

That's a stark contrast from the experience of the subject in "Super Size Me," as he gained more than 20 pounds and wrecked his health after eating a steady diet of fast food for a month.

"It wasn't the food that he ate that caused the problems, it was the portions," Painter said. "We really showed that you can eat fast food and not gain weight."

The first 20 minutes of "Portion Size Me" focus on the students' experiences and the effects of their fast-food diet, and the second part of the film is an educational piece on eating correct portion sizes.

Make no mistake about it, Painter is not recommending a steady diet of fast food. But he's also not buying the argument that fast food is inherently evil.

Instead, it comes down to personal responsibility, he said.

"The fast-food industry is providing what people want," Painter said. "It's people's choices that are making them fat."

In the film, Painter talks to Gene and Betty Hoots, whose original Burger King in Mattoon, Ill., which opened in 1953, pioneered the fast-food industry, pre-dating the Burger King chain.

The Hootses' experiences confirmed what Painter knew all along: Even when healthy choices are offered, people still choose the grease-laden goodies.

The numbers tell the story. Burger King sells about five salads a day, compared to hundreds of burgers. Their No. 1 seller? The double cheeseburger.

The fast-food industry does play a role in influencing people's decisions, making large servings of food seem like the norm, Painter said.

As Painter points out in the film, a 32-ounce McDonald's milkshake packs a whopping 1,110 calories. It's hard to find a bag of potato chips with just one serving in it. And in other countries, a 6-ounce soft drink is the norm, not the United States' 12-ounce cans, 20-ounce bottles and 32-ounce mega cups.

The only thing that's going to make a difference is if consumers change their purchasing habits, Painter said.

They're getting some help from some restaurants. For example, McHugh's Double Drive-Thru in Coles County offers value meals in both medium and large sizes.

"That's the direction we want to go," Painter said of the fast-food industry. "People are going to eat fast food anyway. They just need to do it in moderation."

"Portion Size Me" is scheduled to get its public premiere at an EIU alumni gathering being held during the American Dietetic Association Food and Nutrition Conference in St. Louis, Oct. 22-25.

If the response to that is as positive as is expected, perhaps the film will get a showing in front of all 10,000 conference attendees, Painter said.

"I really think that when we release this documentary, it's just going to go all over the place," Painter said.

Painter's work has been in the spotlight before. While on the faculty at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, he developed an online nutritional calculator that got 2 million hits per month from 90 countries, accounting for 10 percent of the U of I's Web traffic.

"Portion Size Me" was filmed and produced by Pete Grant and Antoine Thomas from EIU's Center for Academic Technology Support. The data on the subjects was analyzed by Karla Kennedy Hagan, assistant professor of nutrition in the EIU School of Family and Consumer Sciences.

A video clip of "Portion Size Me" can be viewed online at www.eiu.edu/~famsci.